



'Ark' Living on Corte Madera Creek

By Scott Fletcher

Marin History Museum Volunteer

The history of Bay Area residents living on 'arks' began in the 1880s and flourished for many decades. At that time, many wealthy families built the flat-bottomed, arched-roof houseboats as vacation homes to escape city living, most notably on Belvedere Cove and Richardson Bay. To this day, the Sausalito houseboat community and 'anchor-out' boats are fairly well-known and sometimes in the news due to clashes with city officials over health and living conditions. Less well-known, however, are the hundreds of arks that once had the Corte Madera Creek as their watery address. That ark community stretched from present day Kentfield and Greenbrae along the creek through Larkspur and out to the bay across from Larkspur Landing.

Before the turn of the twentieth century, Corte Madera Creek was navigable for fairly large vessels and Ross Landing, near today's College of Marin, was a shipping hub moving timber and produce from Marin to San Francisco and other Bay Area cities. According to *Larkspur Past & Present: A History & Walking Guide*, there were close to 400 of these floating arks and houseboats on the creek. Newspaper announcements of the era often mentioned society families hosting parties on their boats or entertaining friends and family for weeks at a time. A particularly memorable event occurred at the 1906 "illuminated water carnival," when thousands of Bay Area residents came to see scores of boats sail up the creek, "fully lit with Japanese lanterns while the nearby homes and all the arks along the creek were similarly illuminated." Colonel W.H. Menton of the *San Francisco and North Pacific Railroad* anchored an ark in Greenbrae that had, "a parlor, two bedrooms, a dancing-room and is provided with hot and cold water and electric bells." The ark lifestyle also attracted those who were interested in a more bohemian and pleasure-seeking lifestyle. There were numerous instances when the local police were called to preserve the peace. One memorable

night in 1901, Marin County Sheriff 'Billy' Taylor was called to quiet down an "orgy" on the arks *Nemo* and *Horse Car* where some young men and women were serenading each other at the top of their lungs, "while bathing in the all-together under the influence of liquor."

Over time the creek silted up and became unnavigable for most boats except those with a very shallow draft. There was an effort in the early twentieth century to dredge the creek and remove the arks for a planned, Venice-style development to be named Marin City. The development never materialized but many houseboat owners, in what was known as "Arkville", were forced to relocate. Today, all of the arks and houseboats have been moved ashore or are moored to one of two boardwalks accessible only on foot. One is in Greenbrae across from the Ferry Terminal and the other in Larkspur near Piper Park.

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